

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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S E C R E T PHNOM PENH 4277

EXDIS

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, MORG, CB

SUBJECT: LON NOL MOVES TOWARD CONFRONTATION WITH SOSTHENE FERNANDEZ

1. I AVAILED MYSELF OF LONG BORET'S PRESENCE WHEN I CALLED ON THE MARSHAL THIS MORNING (MARCH 9) TO RAISE WITH THE MARSHAL THE MATTER OF LONG BORET'S RESIGNATION AND HIS EFFORT TO BRING ABOUT CHANGES IN CAMBODIAN MILITARY HIGH COMMAND.

2. I TOLD LON NOL THAT I HAD HEARD THAT THE CAMBODIAN PARLIAMENT HAD VOTED TO GRANT FULL POWERS TO MARSHAL LON NOL AND HIS GOVERNMENT AND HAD PLACED FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONDUCTING THE WAR ON HIS SHOULDERS. I SAID I HEARD THAT THIS PARLIAMENTARY RESOLUTION WAS INTERPRETED AS THE FIRST MOVE TOWARD A CABINET RESHUFFLE AND CHANGES IN THE CAMBODIAN MILITARY HIGH COMMAND.

3. I THEN TRANSLATED INTO FRENCH BOTH FOR LON NOL AND FOR LONG BORET THE TELEGRAM I HAD SENT LAST NIGHT ON MY CONVERSATION WITH THE PRIME MINISTER (PHNOM PENH 4260). LONG BORET ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE CABLE VERY ACCURATELY REFLECTED HIS VIEWS, AS WELL AS ARGUMENTS I HAD SET FORTH AT THAT MEETING. I THEN TRANSLATED INTO FRENCH THE TELEGRAM I HAD RECEIVED FROM WASHINGTON (STATE 052774) UPHOLDING MY ARGUMENTS AGAINST LONG BORET'S RESIGNATION AND WARNING HIM ABOUT THE ADVERSE EFFECT AN IN-HOUSE FIGHT AMONG KHMER LEADERSHIP MIGHT HAVE ON CONGRESSIONAL ATTITUDES FOR FURTHER ASSISTANCE.

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4. THE MARSHAL SAID THAT HE UNDERSTOOD MY CONCERN OVER

THE EFFECT OF POLITICAL SQUABBLING IN CAMBODIA ON THE ATTITUDE OF AMERICAN LEGISLATORS TOWARD SUPPLEMENTAL AID, BUT HE POINTED OUT THAT HE MUST ALSO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE DETERIORATING ATMOSPHERE IN PHNOM PENH. HE SAID THAT IF NOTHING IS DONE BY THE KHMER AUTHORITIES TO INJECT A NEW FACTOR, THE SITUATION WILL UNRAVEL. THEREFORE, THE GOVERNMENT MUST ACT NOW, BUT IN SUCH A WAY THAT THE CHANGES MADE CANNOT BE EXPLOITED BY CRITICS OF THE CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT. SPECIFICALLY, THE MARSHAL SAID LONG BORET WILL NOT REPEAT NOT RESIGN BUT HE WILL MAKE "ADJUSTMENTS" IN HIS CABINET. THESE CHANGES WILL BE COMMUNICATED TO US IN A COUPLE OF DAYS BEFORE THEY ARE MADE PUBLIC, SO THAT OUR VIEWS CAN BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT.

5. LON NOL STRESSED THAT THE KHMER SENATE AND THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY HAD EXPRESSED THEIR DESIRE TO SEE THE MILITARY BECOME RESPONSIBLE TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC AND HIS GOVERNMENT. AT THE PRESENT TIME THE FANK COMMAND STRUCTURE IS ONLY NOMINALLY UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE PRESIDENT, BUT IS NOT RESPONSIBLE TO THE GOVERNMENT. LON NOL PLANS TO "RESTRUCTURE" THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FANK AND THE GOVERNMENT BY ABOLISHING THE POSITION OF COMMANDER IN CHIEF OF FANK AND DOWNGRADING IT TO THE POSITION OF "CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF OF KHMER ARMED FORCES". LONG BORET CHIMED IN SAYING THAT THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE WOULD HENCEFORTH HAVE TO BE MORE THAN JUST A FIGUREHEAD IN HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FANK WHICH, HE CLAIMED, HAS BEEN THE CASE IN THE PAST.

6. I INQUIRED WHETHER SOSTHENE FERNANDEZ WOULD ACCEPT THIS NEW RELATIONSHIP. LON NOL QUITE OPENLY THOUGHT THAT HE WOULD NOT, BUT THAT HE WAS DETERMINED TO CARRY OUT THE "WILL OF THE SENATE AND THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY". LON NOL STRESSED THAT HE UNDERSTOOD OUR CONCERN ABOUT AN ADVERSE REACTION IN THE STATES TO ANYTHING WHICH COULD BE CONSTRUED AS AN IN-HOUSE FIGHT BETWEEN KHMER MILITARY AND CIVILIANS, BUT HE CONCLUDED THAT THIS "RESTRUCTURING" WAS NEEDED IN ORDER TO GIVE KHMERS

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A BOOST IN MORALE. HE REITERATED THE SAME ARGUMENTS LONG BORET HAD ADVANCED LAST NIGHT WHICH I REPORTED IN PHNOM PENH 4260. THE MARSHAL SAID HE AND HIS TEAM ARE DETERMINED TO GO ON WITH THE STRUGGLE AND HE FEELS THAT THIS CHANGE IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MILITARY AND CIVILIANS IS NEEDED IN ORDER TO ENLIST POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THE CONTINUATION OF THE WAR.

7. SINCE THE MARSHAL WAS CLEARLY DETERMINED TO PROCEED WITH HIS IDEA REGARDLESS OF WHAT I SAID, I MERELY REPEATED AGAIN THAT THE KHMERS SHOULD NOT UNDERTAKE ANY PRECIPITANT ACTION BEFORE THE AMERICAN CONGRESS HAD EXPRESSED ITSELF ON A SUPPLEMENTAL AID REQUEST FOR CAMBODIA.

8. COMMENT: I HAVE ASKED THE MARSHAL'S BROTHER, LON NON, TO COME TO MY RESIDENCE TOMORROW TO DISCUSS THIS MATTER WITH HIM. I SUSPECT THAT HE WAS BEHIND THE MANEUVERS OF THE SENATE AND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY TO TAKE THE ACTION IT TOOK, AND I WILL STRESS WITH HIM AGAIN IMPORTANCE TO AVOID A HEAD-ON CONFRONTATION BETWEEN KHMER MILITARY AND CIVILIANS WHICH WOULD UNDERMINE OUR EFFORT TO OBTAIN SUPPLEMENTAL ASSISTANCE FROM CONGRESS FOR CAMBODIA. I AM NOT SANQUINE THAT I CAN CHANGE THE COURSE IN WHICH MARSHAL HAS EMBARKED. AT LEAST, I MIGHT DELAY ACTION FOR A FEW DAYS AND HOPEFULLY WILL HAVE SOME INFLUENCE ON THE COMPOSITION OF THE RESHUFFLED CABINET.

DEAN

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